

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

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PLANTATION — To fans, Congressman-elect Allen West is a hero, a principled statesman stepping up as a voice for citizens worried about excesses of the federal government. Some soldiers who served under him in the Army are effusive with admiration and his most ardent supporters see him as presidential material.

To foes, West is a wild extremist, a darling of the tea party who tosses verbal grenades without any concern about the potential damage. His harshest critics have taken to the Internet to label him a war criminal.

Starting in January, friends and foes will find out if they're right — and how West's unwavering patriotism and devotion to principles he holds sacred work in Washington.

The man who's both loved and reviled for his fiery rhetoric — one passion-filled speech calling on people to fight against a "tyrannical government" has been viewed more than 2.3 million times on YouTube — isn't storming the Capitol to plant a "Don't Tread On Me" tea party flag on the lawn.

But he is gearing up for battle.

One big clue: When West arrived in Washington three weeks ago for orientation for new members of Congress, he wasn't toting a high-end Gucci briefcase. As he worked the halls of Congress, West carried his camouflage military helmet bag, replete with patches from every unit he served with.

West is 100 percent military. His 22-year career in the Army — not counting his time in high school ROTC or his later work as a military contractor in Afghanistan — explains much about the 49-year-old congressman-elect.

How will he handle himself as a congressman?

"Going back and using my military experience as a metaphor, you can go out and you can get involved in a firefight with the enemy and you can win. But guess what? You've got to go out the next day. And he is thinking about how can he come back and defeat you. You cannot think about how great it was. You've got to understand that when you leave that gate again, you're back into the fight. So that type of perspective keeps me focused."

What will he do between now and the Jan. 5 swearing-in?

"You've got to build your team. And you've got to mentally prepare yourself. Because one thing the military teaches you, you never go into something without a plan. You must understand that that plan, once it is engaged, you have to be flexible and adaptable, but we're going in with a 75 percent plan."

Growing up in Atlanta, West said he was destined for a military life. His father served in World War II. His mother was a career civilian Marine Corps employee. An older brother served in Vietnam.

West joined ROTC in the 10th grade. He went into the Army as soon as he finished college, eventually becoming an artillery officer and paratrooper. As he rose from lieutenant to lieutenant colonel he received two masters degrees, one in political science and the other in political theory and military operations.

Before he ran for Congress — losing in 2008, winning in 2010 — West earned notoriety from an incident in the early stages of the war in Iraq.

In 2003, when West was a battalion commander in Taji, Iraq, he fired his weapon near the head of a prisoner to frighten the detainee into divulging information about a planned ambush. The detainee started providing information, but based on the Army investigation it's not clear whether it was valuable.

West was removed from command and the Army considered a court martial. West argued he acted to save his troops, was fined \$5,000, and was allowed to retire with full honors and benefits.

It's what helped turn Donna Brosemer, formerly of Palm Beach Gardens, into one of his biggest early supporters.

"What I saw in Allen was the kind of leader I wanted my son to have. My son was deployed when I met Allen," she said. "When I first heard Allen speak, the first thing I said to him was I hoped that my son's commanders took the same care of my son that Allen took care of his men."

Brosemer went on to spend 19 months as the first of two campaign managers West had in 2008. Now living in Daytona Beach, she's remained in touch with West but wasn't involved in the 2010 campaign.

Ryan Smith, a Texas Realtor who served under West in Iraq, said by e-mail that his former leader was "a true American hero."

"His actions in Iraq may very well have saved my life and the lives of some of my buddies," Smith wrote. "He was willing to lay everything on the line to ensure that we came home safe."

After he retired, West said, he told his wife the family would settle "wherever you want to go." Angela West, a financial planner with an MBA and a doctorate, said she wanted to live near her cousin in South Florida. In 2003, the Wests and their two daughters moved to Plantation.

For a year, West taught honors history and government and coached track at Deerfield Beach High School. But the military calling was so great, he said, that he signed on as an American military contractor working in Kandahar as an adviser to the Afghan armed forces for more than two years.

The contracting work kept him in Afghanistan until one year before the 2008 elections, hobbling his organization and fundraising efforts against U.S. Rep. Ron Klein, D-Boca Raton.

West never stopped campaigning, even after the loss. In 2010, with more visibility, organization and money, he won 55 percent of the vote and defeated Klein.

Though he doesn't take office until January, West has already rocketed to unusual prominence.

His first publicly announced post-election decision, a since-aborted plan for radio talk show host Joyce Kaufman to become his chief of staff, was savaged from the left on MSNBC. He received national attention for his decision to join the Congressional Black Caucus, where he plans to emphasize conservative values in a bastion of Democratic liberalism. And he landed one of the most coveted invitations in Washington as a guest on Meet the Press.

He knows the TV audience isn't the only group keeping a close eye on him. If he goes to Congress and is seduced by the power and perks of Washington, the people who propelled him into office will turn against him, said Karin Hoffman, founder of the South Florida tea party group DC Works For US.

Like other freshmen Republicans, West is on "probation," Hoffman said. "He's heard the concerns for the last two years. The proof is how he lives it out."

West said he doesn't see himself as "a member of the cocktail circuit," and is on guard to avoid the perils of Washington. "You can't drink of that Potomac water."

West acknowledged expectations are high.

"I can't go up there and build Rome in two years," he said. "People are going to be looking for the indicators of where you're trending. And if in the first 90 to 120 days they don't see those indicators, people are going to get antsy."

Hoffman and Doug Blanz, president of the Republican Business Network in Coral Springs and Parkland, have clear expectations: repealing the health care overhaul law, reducing the size of government, cutting the federal budget and slashing federal regulations.

"He's going to have a very sensitive and difficult tightrope act," said Robert Watson, a political scientist at Lynn University Bachelor's, master's & online degrees in Boca Raton. "On one hand, he's going to have to deliver some red meat that his base wants. On the other hand, because it's a district that's a third [Democratic], a third [Republican], a third [independent/no party] he's going to have to tack to the center."

West said he isn't going to alter his views to appeal to people who didn't vote for him. But, he said, he'll hold town hall meetings at which anyone will be welcome to question his decisions — and he promised he'd have answers about anything he does.

"They can hate me, but they'll respect me," he said.

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